

## most of it by lymricks

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**Characters:** Billy Hargrove, Dustin Henderson, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Steve Harrington

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**Summary:**

Billy looks back over at him, drying his blood-free hand on a corner of the plaid shirt. "What the fuck is wrong with you?" Billy asks.

Steve says, "I wish I fucking knew," even though he does know. What he means is, *I wish I could get it to fucking stop.*

## 1. I

I want the cottage. I want the  
green grass and the tomato plants.  
I want the peace in you;  
the front porch rocking chair lullaby;  
our cricket legs rubbing  
together under the covers.

We can't have it all. I know  
that, but humor me. We can't  
have it all, but we can have most of it.  
— Caitlyn Siehl, from "Apple Pie Life"

It's a Saturday morning in early May, the trees are just *finally* fucking blooming, that newborn green that should be an eyesore but looks more like relief. In a few hours it'll probably be full-blown leaves, but it's just enough to sound pretty in the gusts of wind, not terrifying. In May, the skeleton trees are starting to look more like a forest and each gust of wind pushes even farther away the sound of scuttling leaves over dry, dead grass, the rushing in his ears when he thinks about the tunnel.

Steve has never asked Dustin if the tunnel actually sounded like that, like harsh, cold wind, because he thinks Billy Hargrove might've locked something loose in his head that night and that's where the sound came from.

Steve's got a mug of coffee clutched between two hands and he's sitting with his legs folded together at the edge of the pool, looking down into the water. It's early and the sun is hot against his cheeks, sitting just above the tree line, and if he were smart he'd go get some sunscreen, but *you're an idiot, Steve Harrington* so he doesn't.

He's looking down into the water. He takes a sip of coffee and it's bitter and bracing and soothing all at the same time. He lets it sit on his tongue, still warm, but cooling from the wind. The mug barely produces any heat against his palms anymore. Inside the house, there's a pile of sleeping teenagers in his living room, but it's barely half past seven and it'll be a few more hours before their parents

come to get them.

Which is why he jumps nearly out of his skin when he hears footsteps on the concrete. He looks up from his intense study of the pool to see Billy Hargrove, in the flesh.

"I knocked," Billy says, which no one fucking asked, but okay.

"Max is still sleeping," Steve says. He takes a second to look at Billy. It hasn't even really been sunny yet, but somehow his skin is starting to look a little golden. He's got a white t-shirt on, something oversized and plaid unbuttoned over it, which looks weird on Billy only because it's unfamiliar. Steve is used to tight things that show off skin and muscle. This plaid is a nice dark green, though. It looks comfortable. It looks nice against Billy's skin and makes his eyes pop. His jeans, at least, are still tight. That's familiar.

"You wanna take a picture, Harrington?" Billy asks, his voice dry and his face blank, "It'll last longer."

Maybe it's the pool or maybe it's the sum effect of the memory of someone taking pictures *and* the pool, but Steve ends his inspection of Billy to stare down into his coffee cup, says, "Max is still sleeping," again.

"I didn't fucking ask if she was awake," Billy says, a strange mirror of Steve's mental response to *I knocked*. Steve looks back up at him.

"You wanna go wake her up and face them all then that's your choice, man," Steve says. He sets the coffee mug down and the grating sound of ceramic against concrete echoes, loud enough to make him flinch, a little.

Billy's brows furrow. "I don't really want to do that," he says. This frown is the first actual expression he's had on his face since he scared Steve by being here. Nancy has this thing she says about spiders, it isn't that she's afraid they'll hurt her, it's that she's afraid they exist in the same universe that she does and every time she sees one, she remembers.

Steve feels that way, a little, about Billy Hargrove. It isn't that he's

afraid Billy will hurt him, it's that the knowledge of Billy's--*being* sometimes feels like a little too much to take. So it puts him on edge when Billy sinks down next to him at the edge of the pool, not quite close enough to touch.

Billy has never apologized. They've never really talked about it, but they can talk about other shit now, mostly, because of one night when it was still cold and it was the middle of February.

Steve was at the library with the kids, watching Dustin try to argue his way out of a lifetime ban. Something to do with blatant disregard for the rules, which, Steve had wanted to look at the librarian and say *I know, he's the worst*, except every second she refused to give Dustin those books was another second Steve was standing in the library, so it was kind of tough to empathize with her. At least she got paid to be there.

Finally, Lucas had elbowed Max who had pushed hair out of her face and heaved the most put-upon sigh Steve had ever seen, and then she went and checked out the books for Dustin.

"Just remember, young lady," the librarian had said, a little threatening, "These are in *your name*." Max had smiled sweetly before she dumped the books in Dustin's arms and walked out of the room, hair swinging behind her.

Steve had nearly crashed into her when he was going down the steps. It was because he was looking over his shoulder, asking Dustin how he'd gotten a lifetime ban from the library, for fuck's sake, and Max was just. Not moving.

Dustin, who was yelling at Will, who was looking at Mike, who was holding the door for Lucas, did crash into Steve. He dropped the books and then Mike dropped the door on Lucas's face and then they were all staring where Max was staring.

Billy's Camaro was in the library parking lot, but what they were all looking at was Billy, sitting on the ground with his back against the driver's side door and his knees to his chest. "Billy?" Max asked. She got a grunt in response.

Steve had sighed and herded the kids toward his car, handed Dustin his keys. They'd gotten in but rolled the windows down. Steve had walked back across the parking lot to Billy and kicked his shoe. "The fuck, Hargrove?"

"M'here to get Max," Billy had said, words a little slurred.

"You're not driving your sister around *drunk*," Steve had answered, his eyes a little wide.

"Not drunk," Billy had said, then, a little more thoughtful, "Not my sister," and then he'd spat blood onto the pavement. When he lifted his head to look up at Steve, his mouth was tinged bloody and he had a black eye and bruising near his temple.

Steve had made two decisions quickly. He walked over to the car with the kids in it, took out his wallet, and handed all the money to Lucas. "Go to the diner," he said. "I gotta deal with this."

"Is he okay?" Max had asked.

"Who *cares*?" Dustin had scoffed.

"Dustin!" Will had scolded.

And the whole effect was a lot of kids talking at once. Steve held up a hand for silence, which he sometimes saw teachers do in movies. It didn't work. They all kept talking. "Okay!" Steve said, voice a little louder. Everyone stopped. "He's just beat up. Probably got in a stupid fight," Steve said, and something on Max's face looked dubious about that, and then--surprisingly--she looked angry. "I'm going to take him home and then come back for you all. All right?"

A lot of talking at once, again, but Max rose above, deftly smacking the boys until all eyes were on her. "His dad will be *really mad* if his car isn't home," she said, and she said it like Steve would understand something in her tone, but he didn't.

*How come this random girl is the only one helping me?* Steve sighed and figured taking the Camaro home was the least that he could do for her. She was worried, even if he didn't get it. "Sure," Steve said. "I'll get it there."

“Steve!” Dustin had protested, his voice loud. “That guy is an *asshole*! Don’t you remember what he did to your *face*?”

Steve did remember, he did, but, “If I leave him beat up in the parking lot--” Steve didn’t really have an end to that sentence. “It’s just not right, Dustin. There’s enough bullshit in the world. I’m just taking him home.”

“If you’re not back here in a reasonable time, I’m calling Hopper,” Dustin said, and he was pouting, which meant he was going to spend *all* of Steve’s money.

Steve nodded. “Sure thing,” he said, and then he’d turned around and walked back over to Billy.

He kicked his boot again. “Get in my car. I’m taking you home.”

“Fuck you,” Billy had sneered, but he’d taken the hand Steve offered and climbed to his feet. He’d wrapped an arm around his ribs and winced, and gotten into Steve’s car. “I’m supposed to bring Max home,” Billy had said. “My dad--”

And Steve had wondered why Billy cared so much about his dad since he was an asshole in every other context, but whatever. He’d thought maybe Billy just liked being a good son, or something. “You can tell him I’m bringing her home,” Steve had said, shrugging. “Tell him we were out for dinner. I’ll come to the door and apologize if he wants.”

Billy snorted a laugh, then winced, curling around his ribs. “Fuck you,” he said again, but Steve was starting to think that meant, *yeah, okay*, in Billy’s language.

So he’d taken Billy home and then he’d taken the kids home and finally he had taken the Camaro home. Then he’d walked all the way back into town where he’d left the BMW and he’d had a parking ticket, and Steve had rolled his eyes and paid it instead of trying to fight it, because he was tired of fighting shit, really, and sometimes it felt good just to give in like that.

After, he and Billy had never talked about it, but they saw each other

a lot because of the kids, and things seemed--fine, between them.

Steve glances over at Billy, sitting next to him at the edge of the pool, and Billy is shivering even though it's not really cold. Steve realizes, then, that the reason Billy's wearing the oversized plaid thing that makes Billy look a little soft, a little rumpled, that makes him look like kinda like half past seven in the morning is because he's from somewhere out in California and even with this sun that's going to give Steve a sunburn, the wind and the actual temperature are chilly, and Billy's cold.

Steve doesn't know why, but that softens Billy's edges, for him, just a little bit more.

Billy picks up his mug of coffee, takes a sip, and spits it back into the cup, looking horrified.

Any brief feelings of warmth that Steve had entertained are now gone. "What the fuck?" Steve says, gaping at him.

"You drink this shit *black*?" Billy asks. "Fucking disgusting, Harrington. I thought I could at least trust you to do a little cream and sugar." He motions behind them, "Does the kingdom not have cream and sugar?"

Steve used to drink what his mom called cream and sugar with a little coffee for flavor, but all that had changed the night the pictures were taken and his pool and the monsters in it had taken Barb away. After that, Steve had needed something in the morning to wake him up, to brace him, and he'd started drinking his coffee black.

He's found, now, that he likes it that way. There's something about the routine of making it, the smell of it, the way it sits on his tongue, that's reassuring. Steve wakes up most mornings with his mouth open on a silent scream that only he can hear, so it's nice to have something a little reassuring. "I like it black," Steve says.

"Okay," Billy says, which is a little too acquiescent, maybe, but then Steve remembers that Billy just *spit* in his *coffee*.

"Fuck you," Steve says, grabbing the mug and tossing the coffee in it

out into the grass. He sets it down so hard that this time the concrete doesn't bump against the mug so much as it shatters it.

Steve and Billy stare at the shards for a second before Billy says, "Harrington, you're bleeding," and he grabs Steve's hand and *dunks it in the pool*.

Steve can't see his own face, or anything, but he's willing to bet it goes absolutely white. He actually can't speak for a moment through the wave of absolute *terror* that courses through him. He stares at where his hand is in the pool, Billy's fingers around his wrist, blood curling and spreading in the water, panic-stricken, and his mouth opens in that same silent scream, but no sound comes out.

In his nightmares, no sound comes out of his mouth when he screams because no one could hear Barb screaming.

Steve wrenches his hand out of Billy's grip and throws himself backwards, launches himself away from the pool, scrambles until his wet, sluggishly bleeding hand and the rest of his body are in the grass. He doesn't know what his expression must be, but Billy's staring at him, looking wide-eyed and soft in his stupid white t-shirt and all that green plaid.

"Harrington," Billy says, "Are you okay?"

Steve looks down at his hand and then back at Billy. He'd gotten a little bit of Steve's blood on him in the scramble. Steve can see it, red against the slow-going-gold of Billy's skin. Steve sets his jaw. "Not the first time you've had my blood on your hands, is it?" he says, but it lacks a little of the bite he wants it to have.

Billy's expression goes from a little concerned to totally blank. He sticks his hand in the pool to wash Steve's blood off, and Steve can't stop the strangled sound that he makes. Billy looks back over at him, drying his blood-free hand on a corner of the plaid shirt. "What the fuck is wrong with you?" Billy asks.

Steve says, "I wish I fucking knew," even though he does know. What he means is, *I wish I could get it to fucking stop*.



Billy looks at him for a second and then he does the weirdest thing. He gathers up the shards of the mug and then he goes into Steve's house.

Steve figures that he's going to get Max, because Billy's probably thinking, fuck off with this, right, this crazy kid I'm only stuck with for another month who is clearly afraid of swimming pools, or something, but then Billy comes back out and he's holding two mugs in his hands. He sets them down and sits back by the pool. "I'm not room service," Billy says. "You can come over here and drink your coffee or you can stay over there."

Steve gets off the ground and walks back over to the edge of the pool. He sits down next to Billy and picks up the mug. It's black and it's warm and Billy isn't looking at him. "Thanks?" Steve says, like a question, because maybe it's poisoned. He has no way of knowing.

Billy doesn't say *you're welcome* or anything, which is kind of a relief because it lets Steve think maybe the coffee is poisoned and Billy is really the asshole Steve's been thinking he is, and not the guy who cleaned up the shards of Steve's shattered mug and tried to stop the bleeding looking soft in a plaid shirt by his pool.

Billy looks at his watch. "My dad wants Max home by eight," he says, and there's something a little tight in his voice. "He wants to take us all to some fair or something."

"The county fair?" Steve asks. "It's actually kind of fun. I went last year." With Nancy, he doesn't say. Steve presses his palms against the mug of coffee and lets the warmth from it creep up his arms.

"What a glowing endorsement," Billy says, taking a sip from his own mug. Steve leans over, closer to him, and sees that it's pale brown with cream. "Harrington," Billy says, "Have you ever heard of personal space?"

Steve rolls his eyes. "Can I try your coffee?" he asks. "See, I'm asking. That's polite. And if I don't like it, I'm not going to spit it back into your mug. Also polite. Didn't your mother ever teach you manners?"

Billy holds the coffee out and Steve takes it. Billy waits until Steve

has coffee in his mouth before he says, "My mother hung herself when I was eight, so. No."

Steve does spit the coffee out as he sputters, his cheeks flushing, but at least he spit it on the concrete and not into Billy's mug. "Uh," he says, "Shit. Sorry."

Billy shrugs and then laughs. It's small, but he's sort of laughing *with* Steve and not *at* Steve, so that's kind of nice. Even if the topic. Isn't. "You didn't know," Billy says. "I really was kind of hoping you'd spit it back into the cup. Is it better manners to spit it onto the floor?"

"This isn't the floor," Steve protests, "It's the ground! That's different."

Billy rolls his eyes at him and takes his mug back, "Semantics," he says.

Steve doesn't know what that word means, but he'll ask Lucas later, or something. Steve doesn't think too hard about the fact that his friendship with a bunch of little kids is how he gets his answers to definitions for words he doesn't really know. Maybe he should look in a dictionary instead. He leans over and looks at Billy's watch. "Personal space," Billy reminds him, but he doesn't sound angry. He doesn't even sound annoyed.

"You stuck my hand in the pool," Steve says. "Shut up." He frowns, "It's 7:50," he adds. Have they been out here for that long? "You're going to be late. You want me to go wake her up?"

Billy shrugs. "Let her sleep a little longer," he says, but he's not looking at Steve when he says it, he's looking out at the trees, newly green, rustling in the wind in a way that Steve thinks sounds calming. "I want to finish my coffee, anyway."

Steve will learn, later, that there are consequences for being late, and he will learn, later, how much that means Billy wanted to stay and talk with him, and he will learn, later, too, a lot more.

But not yet. For now, he sits next to Billy, gives him his personal space, and doesn't say anything at all about dead moms or absent

moms or the weird bruise he's just noticed at Billy's collarbone. Billy doesn't ask why Steve had a meltdown about the pool. They sit there and drink coffee, mostly silent, a strange truce between them.

## 2. II

Billy has bruises high on the underside of his upper arms when he rolls up to the county fair. They ache and feel bone deep, which probably has something to do with how hard and how long his dad had gripped him for, the counter digging its own bruise into the small of Billy's back.

Billy had been forty two minutes late getting Max home to go to the county fair, and he's pretty sure he did the whole family a goddamn favor, getting them out of forty two minutes of this stupid fucking fair, but his dad didn't agree.

Billy lives someplace where there is a *county fucking fair* and that's just fucking *great*.

At least once they get there, once they've done a few laps, he finds Harrington. His back is to Billy and he's got the palm of his hand resting on a mop of curls that Billy knows must be the loud kid with the energy and the questions. That one's got a name that makes Billy think of cleaning, and no matter how many times Max tells him what it is, Billy is never going to fucking remember because Billy does not care. He recognizes Harrington from behind, though, the way the t-shirt falls across his shoulders, tapers in at the waist.

Billy takes a long second just to *look* and then he's wandering through the crowd and bumping into him.

"Oh, sorry," Harrington says as he turns around, like Billy hadn't just crashed into him, like it's somehow his fault. His face does something when he sees Billy that looks like it might be a smile when it grows up, and something in Billy's chest flutters a little bit. Billy ignores those two conclusions almost as soon as he draws them, because he lives someplace where there's a county fucking fair and the thumb shaped bruises on the underside of his upper arms hurt like a bitch. So.

"I crashed into you," Billy says, like Harrington is stupid.

"Yeah, because you're an *asshole*," the loud one with the curly hair

snaps from somewhere below Harrington's big brown eyes.

Billy glances at him. "Did I *ask you*--Derek?" he says.

"It's *Dustin!*" the kid squeaks, "Were you *dropped on your head*? I am best friends with your sister! I see you like, once a day!"

Once a day is just about three times too many for Billy to deal with, honestly. "I don't care," he replies, goes for simple, honest. When he looks up, though, Harrington is frowning at him like Billy's done something wrong. Billy glances back at the kid--at *Dustin*--who is sulking and shrugging Harrington's hand off his shoulder.

Billy wonders if Harrington is going to apologize for something Billy did, like when Billy crashed into him. Harrington doesn't, though, he just heaves a sigh and shoves some money at Dustin. "Go buy us something good," Harrington says. He's looking at Billy when he says it, so he misses the way Dustin's whole face goes bright with glee. "I swear to fucking god, Dustin," Harrington adds, still looking at Billy, "If you come back here with a pound of chocolate covered bacon, I'm going to use your head as a basketball--"

The threat doesn't land, because Dustin's already scurrying away. Billy blinks. "Chocolate covered--"

"It's good," Harrington says, like he hadn't just threatened the kid over it. "I just don't want it to be the only thing I eat today."

There's a joke on the tip of Billy's tongue about something else Harrington could eat, but he doesn't make it because of county fairs and bruises, because half Hawkins standing around them is nothing like the silence and the rustling trees around Harrington's pool. Billy can still feel Harrington's wrist in his hand, the rapid-fire beat of his pulse under his fingertips when he'd panicked.

"Didn't know you were coming," Billy says, a statement and not a question. He's feigning disinterest, scanning the crowd around them like he's waiting for someone better to talk to. He's not. Harrington is the best person to talk to and Billy wishes that weren't fucking true.

"Dustin was pissed when it turned out Max was going," Harrington

says. "So I brought the kids. I thought your dad was bringing the family? Shouldn't you be with them?"

Billy wonders how well, *he doesn't actually consider me a part of the family* would go over. He wonders how well, *I was forty two minutes late coming home and so he slammed me against the wall and dug bruises into my arms hard enough I felt sick* would go over. He says, "Ditched 'em. Only so much family time a guy can take." He says it real casual, too, like it's no big deal.

Harrington's looking at him, frowning now, his brows furrowed. It's that face that makes Billy feel like he's done something wrong, like when he called Dustin by the wrong name, but not like when he'd spit in Harrington's coffee. "You lost the plaid," Harrington says, changes the subject. He flaps a hand to indicate Billy's arms.

For a second, Billy's confused. "It's getting hot," he says, a little defensive.

Harrington snorts a laugh. "Yeah, okay," he says, and then he reaches out and trails his fingertips down Billy's arm. Sparks light up under Billy's skin everywhere he touches. "You've got goosebumps," Harrington says.

Billy wonders how well, *it's not because it's chilly, you dumb fuck* would go over, but he's pretty sure it would make Harrington stop touching him, so. He doesn't say that. "Didn't go with my look," he offers instead.

Harrington smiles at him like he's giving Billy a prize for good behavior. His fingers are still on Billy's arm. "That sounds more like the truth," Harrington says. Billy has to wrench his eyes away from Harrington's mouth before he's too obvious about it.

"Billy!"

The sound of Max's voice has Harrington dropping his hand, which is a good thing, because Max's shout comes right before his dad and Susan walk around the corner. A heartbeat earlier and they would have seen--

What? The straight kid on his basketball team touching his arm? It shouldn't be a big deal, but it would be.

Max had seen, though. He can tell by the look on her face. She's smart, that kid, takes more after him than is good for her. He can almost see the wheels turning in her brain, under all that bright red hair. She's got a look on her face like she's getting an idea. It makes Billy nervous.

He turns away from Harrington like he doesn't know him, like he's never seen him a day in his life. He walks over to his *family*. He doesn't say goodbye.

The wind blows and Billy shivers and thinks maybe his blood runs too cold, thinks that he never got cold like this in California, thinks that the sunshine here must be too weak, or something.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Max hisses at him once he gets over to them, while Susan is pointing out the largest fucking tomato or what the fuck ever to his dad.

"I'm enjoying the county fair, Maxine," Billy says, not looking at her.

"I mean with--" she stops, glances at his dad, looks back at Billy, "With *Steve*."

Billy cuts his gaze to her, sharp enough to cut, sets his jaw and twists his mouth mean. "Shut the fuck up," he says to her, deadly serious because maybe this is a life or death situation, "You keep your little mouth fucking shut, you hear me?"

She snaps her mouth shut and it takes Billy a second to remember it's May now and he hasn't gone at her like that since the Snow Ball. He curls his fingers into fists at his sides, then lets them go.

Max doesn't say anything. After taking a few slow breaths, Billy says, "I hear they sell chocolate covered bacon, here. Wanna try it?"

Max looks at him for a long, suspicious heartbeat before she nods. Her expression is all guile, but when she whirls around she's wide eyed and innocent as she calls out, "Mom! Can I have some money? I want to get chocolate covered bacon!"

His dad's eyes on him are heavy. The wind in Hawkins is still cold and the sun is only hinting at warmth, but Billy thinks he might be sweating as his dad looks at him. The bruises on his arms throb, but after a second, his dad nods his permission, and then Billy and Max duck around the corner. Billy feels like he can breathe again.

"I'm not doing anything with Harrington," Billy says when they're far enough away.

Max looks surprised when he glances at her. "I thought you wanted me to shut the fuck up," she says, crossing her arms.

She's not going to let him off the hook for snapping, clearly. "Max," Billy says, "You can't just say shit like that--" he stops, then, because he doesn't say the kind of thing that he's about to say out loud.

"In front of your dad?" Max asks. Billy grits his teeth. A muscle in his jaw jumps. Max looks at him, serious, concerned. "I won't," she says, "Say anything I mean. Again. I'm sorry."

Billy looks away from her. He thinks that if he were a better fucking person he'd say sorry too, for snapping. He doesn't. He looks around them and says, "There's the chocolate covered bac--"

He stops, suddenly, staring at the little booth, at what's going on right in front of it.

"You don't need to yell at him! He's just a kid!" Harrington is saying, standing in front of Dustin and waving his hands around.

"He tried to stiff me," a vendor answers, arms crossed and glaring at Steve. The dude is big, Billy thinks.

"He was going to get more money from me and he apologized, so I don't understand why we're still having this conversation when I *already paid you*," Harrington's saying. He keeps waving his hands around because he's really fucking dramatic.

The guy grits his teeth and points at Dustin, "Because that little fuck--"

The man doesn't get to finish, because Harrington pulls a fist back



and and absolutely *smashes* him in the face. “What did you call him?” Harrington asks. His voice is so hard it could crack teeth, but Billy’s pretty sure his fist has that part handled.

“Don’t fucking move,” Billy says to Max. He shoves two people who’ve stopped to gape out of his way and reaches Harrington’s side just as Harrington is shaking his hand out, mouth pulled back in a nasty grin. Billy’s startled by how much Harrington’s expression reminds him of himself in this moment. “Easy,” Billy says, holding up a hand to the guy. “You got your money, right? No harm, here.”

Dustin’s face is white and Max runs over and grabs his shoulder. It’s the opposite of not moving and Billy wishes she’d just listen to him for once, wishes that she hadn’t put herself closer to a bad situation, but the guy is rubbing his jaw and Billy’s way more worried about what he’s going to do next than what Max is going to do next.

“I’m calling the cops,” the guy says.

Harrington *laughs*. “Do it,” he says, that same dark edge to his voice. Billy’s trying to reconcile this Harrington with the one he’d sat with that morning. This one is all sharp edges, could cut glass.

Harrington takes a step forward, his hand making a fist, and Billy makes a decision and grabs him around the waist, hauls him backwards, says, “Run,” to Max and Dustin. They move. Harrington, the dumb motherfucker, *plants his goddamn feet*. “If you do not fucking move,” Billy says, “I will toss you over my goddamn shoulder,” and then Harrington finally, *finally* gives in.

They run.

It takes them a few minutes to find the kids, but when they do, Max has acquired a cup of ice and a stack of napkins. She takes Harrington’s hand without asking, like it’s okay just to fucking touch whoever you want whenever you want, like there’s no danger in that, and then she presses the napkin-wrapped ice to his knuckles. Harrington hisses at the cold, but offers a thank you with an easy smile.

Billy is fascinated by this transition, because the guy throwing

punches with his teeth bared had been dangerous, had been feral and this guy is all soft edged babysitter, different from the guy by the pool this morning, but not as juxtaposed as the Harrington he just watched. "Didn't know you had it in you," Billy says. He wants to take Harrington's ice wrapped hand from Max and do it himself.

He doesn't.

Obviously.

Harrington looks up at him for a second. "You beat the shit out of me *one* time," Harrington says, but that darkness is gone from his voice, there's not even a hint of an edge to it, "I don't think that means you know everything about me."

There's more meaning there than just the words give, but Billy doesn't have time to ask about it, because Max makes a soft noise and dumps the ice back in the cup, drops it all in a garbage can behind her and says, "Hide your hand," to Harrington.

Billy watches her go from conniving to sweet and wishes he'd turned around to see what made her move so fast. He doesn't have to turn around though, because a palm lands on the back of his neck, a good imitation of a friendly slap, and the fingers dig in for just a second, a warning.

Billy's whole body goes rigid as the smell of his dad's cologne fills his nose, overrides the smell of cow shit and sunshine and food.

He pastes a smile on his face. "Hi dad," he says, like it's easy. Like it's nothing. Like it doesn't goddamn matter. The bruises on his arms sing. His dad's palm is so warm Billy feels like his skin is gonna blister.

"I heard there was a fight," his dad says. Billy shifts his head to look in the relative direction of him because, *you look at me when I'm speaking, boy* is a lesson he learned two hundred thirty four days after his eighth birthday, just a few weeks after his mom was in the ground. "Wanted to make sure you were keeping out of trouble."

Billy hears Harrington shift like he's going to answer the question and

Billy turns to look at him. Harrington meets Billy's gaze and a heartbeat passes and then Harrington's smile is broad, is easy, a little smarmy. "Mr. Hargrove," Harrington says, holding a hand out.

His dad has to let go of Billy to shake his hand. Billy exhales in relief. He can feel Max staring at him as Harrington makes small talk with his dad, but he's not listening. He's thinking that he should've just stayed with the fucking family. He's thinking--

"Billy," his dad says, and Billy turns around to look at him. "I said-- this is the third time I'm asking--" and that's a warning, too,-- "did your sister get her chocolate covered bacon?"

No, she fucking didn't, because Harrington is a dumb asshole who picked a fight with the vendor, but Billy's supposed to be staying out of trouble, and this is only going to end one way and--

"Right here!" Dustin says. Billy turns his head to openly gape at him as Dustin shoves a bag at Max. "I was carrying it for her," Dustin explains, "Because chivalry, you know?"

Max takes the bag and Billy waits for Dustin's poker face to break and show the lie, but it doesn't. He beams at her and she says thank you. His dad sighs. "Well," he says. "It was good to meet you boys," he glances at Harrington, at Dustin, looks at Billy suspiciously. "But we promised Maxine she'd get to go do the--tractors, or something." His dad doesn't actually sound that interested. "Billy, are you coming?"

That's another warning. "I'll catch up with you later," Billy says. He'll catch *hell* for that later, is what he'll fucking do, but Billy can't stomach the thought of that palm on the back of his neck right now and he's always failed all the fucking delayed gratification tests, or whatever. Just give him the goddamn marshmallow *now*. He'll steal two more later.

"All right," his dad says, his eyes heavy on Billy. "Come on, Max, Susan," and Billy watches Susan fall right the fuck in line and walk away, like she isn't a goddamn adult who knows what Neil Hargrove does to his son, who knew--like Billy knew--every warning he was sending out, who had flinched, too, when that palm landed on the back of Billy's neck.

She's a fucking coward and Billy *hates her*.

"You wanna go smoke somewhere?" Harrington says. Billy had sort of forgotten he was there, but when he turns to look at him, Harrington's expression is gentle, is warm and easy. Like he had been by the pool that morning. He looks at Billy like he sees something worth seeing.

"Yeah," Billy says. "I really fucking do."

They can't actually smoke at the fair and you're not allowed to go back in once you leave, but Harrington says he knows a way to sneak in by the actual farmhouse of the guy who owns the property, so they leave anyway. They're in the middle of *nowhere*, which feels just about right for a county fair, and Harrington leads him down the road a little, then turns on something that could maybe generously be called a trail, and they end up in a strange little circular clearing, ringed by trees turning green. It's quiet. It's empty. Billy feels like he can actually breathe for the first time since he'd left Harrington's backyard that morning.

"I don't actually have any cigarettes," Harrington says from where he's flopped back on the grass like he's trying to make a snow angel. He glances at Billy and grins, private and sheepish. Billy's going to collect all these different smiles Harrington has and keep them locked up somewhere for when it won't stop raining or when he's not allowed to clean his room, or something.

Or maybe Billy's going to get the fuck over whatever *this* is, because actually all Harrington's doing is bumming a fucking *cigarette* and it's not his fault he's the best thing to look at in Hawkins, Indiana.

Billy rolls his eyes at Harrington and pulls out his pack, holds it out. He leans in too close with his lighter to light the cigarette Harrington's got between his lips, breathes in the smell of his expensive cologne, his shampoo, the grass he'd just been lying in, and he hopes Harrington doesn't notice.

Billy just wants to fucking clear the smell of his dad out of his nose, that's what he tells himself. It has nothing to do with filling his nose with Harrington's smell, with another something to lock away for

later, just in case he needs it.

When they're both smoking, Billy says, "How'd you find this place?"

"When you grow up somewhere like Hawkins you get to know the nooks and crannies, I guess."

"Do you live in a fucking english muffin?" Billy asks. "This where you come to fuck all those Hawkins bitches?"

Harrington doesn't sputter, which Billy had kind of expected. He sighs, long and slow. "It's where I come when I can't sleep," he says instead. "Only when it's dawn, though. I don't like the woods at night. The skeleton trees."

Billy feels like Harrington has given him a secret and he's not sure what to do with it, but any amicable feelings he's starting to have fade when Harrington says, "Your dad's kind of a hardass, huh?"

Billy shifts, taps ash, says, "Yeah."

"Nice though, that he cares so much."

"Sure is," Billy agrees, plucking bits of grass. He turns his head to look at Harrington, and he's lying back again, his shirt riding up to reveal his stomach. Harrington's not looking, so Billy stares openly at all that pale Indiana skin and wonders what it tastes like.

"Thanks for getting me out of there," Harrington offers. "With the bacon guy."

Billy wrenches his eyes away from Harrington's skin and knows that he's been caught looking. He covers his tracks. "Didn't want Max to get in trouble. My old man's a hardass, like you said. She's my responsibility, so," Billy says, casual, like he doesn't give two shits.

Something in Harrington's face closes off. "Right," he says. "Thanks for the cigarette." He stands up, and Billy thinks that closed off face almost looks a little hurt. "Go around the house, to the left, third fence post down there a hole Tommy and I made when we were twelve," and then Harrington looks at him for a long second and Billy feels like he's done something wrong, but can't fucking figure out

what.

He doesn't get a chance to ask, though, because Harrington just walks away.

Billy finishes the cigarette and tries to figure out why Harrington just walked the fuck off like that. It doesn't end up mattering because he can't find the fucking fence post Harrington talked about and Billy has to wait outside the fair for two fucking hours for his dad and Max and Susan to come out. He'd given all his money to Max.

At home that night, once Max and Susan have gone to bed, Billy's dad informs him that's three strikes for the day and he needs to learn to be *better*.

Billy's mistake is that he asks what the third strike was, because by his count there's only two--late in the morning, snuck out of the fair.

His dad gets real close and says, "I heard from a neighbor that you and that *boy* were involved in a fight."

Billy's got more bruises on his arms when he goes to bed, more on his ribs, and a nasty bump on the side of his head from where it met the wall of a few times.

That *boy*, his father had hissed near his ear, like he knew, like he was suspicious.

Billy wonders how his dad knew because he's only just now figuring it out himself. A parent's intuition, maybe. It would be just Billy's luck that out of all the fucking instincts parents are supposed to get, his dad gets only the one that makes it easier for him to know when Billy's fucked up, when he needs to *learn a lesson*.

He pulls the blankets over his head and because it's Sunday he sleeps and sleeps and sleeps until he knows the house is empty except for Max. One day after another, he thinks. Someday, he gets to fucking leave.

He just has to make it until the end of the year. Maybe a little longer.

Except.

*That boy*, his dad had said. Billy, in the dull sunlight of a May afternoon, slams his fist into his bedroom wall and says, “*Fuck.*”

**Notes for the Chapter:**

I'm @lymricks on tumblr & I love to talk about these two, poetry, the West Wing...pretty much anything? Also, Jane the Virgin. Please, somebody come talk with me about Jane the Virgin.

### 3. III

On Sunday, after a restless night spent tossing and turning, Steve drags himself out of bed at 6:30 and bangs on Tommy's window.

"Let's get breakfast," Steve says, and he isn't surprised when Tommy climbs out the window, dressed, a few minutes later and then turns around to swing Carol down. She's laughing and lands with her feet planted between his. They kiss and Steve looks away, studies the birds flitting in and out of a big old oak tree at the very edge of Tommy's backyard.

That tree has always been Steve's favorite tree in Hawkins. He could never explain to Nancy why, but it's something about the shape of it, the way that every year since he met Tommy when he was five years old, Steve's watched it go from skeletal to a fragile green to this--*verdant*, Nancy would call it, had called it, once--alive and vibrant and so, so green.

"Hi Steve," Carol says, fingers on his shoulder before she's wandering around him to the car. She climbs into the back without preamble. Steve blinks at her as she settles herself, leans over the console to check her hair in his rearview mirror.

"Hi Carol," Steve says, even though she can't hear him.

He can feel Tommy's eyes on his face. This has been a slow knitting back together, Steve thinks, but they're almost where they were before, except they're--both of them--so fucking different now. It's a lot to wrap his head around. "You alright, Stevie boy?" Tommy asks, kind of looking at him.

Steve could lie. He could say *I'm fine*, but Tommy's seen every big lie Steve's ever told, except the one, that night in front of the Byers's house, and so Tommy would know it was a lie. "I'm tired," Steve says, a little like an admission. Tommy accepts it for the half-truth that it is.

"Where are we going?" Carol asks, face popping up between them when they're finally all in the car.



“Breakfast,” Steve and Tommy say at the same time. They share a grin, then. It’s small, but it’s something.

They go to the shitty diner, the one right in the center of town that says it’s open all night, but really closes at three. The coffee is a little too weak and the eggs aren’t great, but it was where they went when none of them had cars, yet, when they had to walk everywhere, when Carol would beg, “Please, mom, could you drop us off in town?” like the center of Hawkins was the center of the universe. For them, in those days, it was.

So they go to the shitty diner because that’s where they always go and Steve pokes at his omelette with a little bit of trepidation while Tommy eats his pancakes like he’s dying.

Carol grins at them over the mouth of her mug of coffee and says, “So Marscha told me that Sarah told her that Billy Hargrove couldn’t get into the fair yesterday!”

Steve forgets, sometimes, what a gossip Carol is, and he can never figure out *how* he forgot once she starts talking. He knows Billy was at the fair so he says, “Really?”

“Yeah, he was sitting outside when she got there with Dillon--and they broke up, obviously, he’s so terrible, ugh, that *face*, but she left two hours later and he was still sitting on the same hay bale!”

That means Billy hadn’t been able to find the fence post to sneak back in. Steve would feel guilty, but there’s still something in him that’s small and hurt, curling and drifting like smoke, so he doesn’t fucking feel guilty about it. “Strange,” Steve says.

Tommy’s looking at him like, what the fuck don’t encourage her.

Carol says, “Marscha thinks he couldn’t afford it. I didn’t realize he lived near Old Cherry. *That* would explain why there’s never any parties at his house.”

Steve knows that Billy only didn’t have any money to get back in because he shoved it all at Max when he was getting Steve out of a nasty situation, but Steve only says, “Huh,” and takes a big sip from

his coffee. Then he *does* feel a little guilty so he adds, “I think his dad is kind of a hardass.”

“If I lived there I would *definitely* never have people over,” Carol says, shrugging, and Steve thinks that she’s a *bitch*, but he was, too, and you have to get better in increments, through work.

Or all at once, all the sudden, because your girlfriend breaks your heart and monsters break through from another dimension.

Steve wants Carol to get better the normal way. He says, “I don’t know. The house isn’t that bad.”

Tommy looks up, then. “Didn’t he beat the shit out of you?” he asks, like it’s a question even though they all know it’s a fact. “The fuck are you doing at his house?”

“The fuck are you doing hanging out with him all the time if he beat the shit out of me?” Steve shoots back, leaves, *if you’re my best friend* unspoken. He feels bad for it right away.

Steve’s all barbed wire these days. Every time someone gets close he pricks them. Keep the fuck out.

He’s so tired of it.

“Sorry,” he says, “I’m up there sometimes to drop his sister off.”

“Ugh,” Carol says, plopping a strawberry in her mouth, “Aren’t you afraid you’ll get mugged or something?”

Steve rolls his eyes. “It’s not *dangerous* there Carol, come on.”

She shrugs. “Anyway, I heard you got in a fight, nearly!” she says. “With a big guy? Someone broke it up for you? Awful nice of them.”

Steve wonders, for a second, why Carol’s sources don’t know it was Billy who broke the fight up. “Yeah,” he says. “It was stupid.”

“You’ve been running hot,” Tommy says. He says it with his mouth full of pancake, but when Steve looks at him, Tommy’s face is serious. It’s a weird look on him, because his face is also all freckles.

“Hargrove knock something loose in you?”

He did, actually, but not because of the fight. Steve can't shake the feeling that he wants to look around for Billy, that he wants to say sorry for leaving him in that clearing, smoking. That he wants to *see* him. That's got nothing to do with the fight, though.

Steve shrugs. “I'm tired,” he says.

This time, it doesn't look like Tommy believes him.

~

It's 5:45 in the morning and it's Monday, but Steve is already at school. He's already standing in the gym, in shorts and no shirt, because the building is hot. It doesn't have AC because Indiana's only hot sometimes, or something, and he's covered in sweat, but he's got a few hours so he figures he'll take a shower once he's done.

Steve hadn't really slept on Friday night, which is why he'd been drinking coffee alone out by his pool when Billy interrupted him, and he hadn't really slept Saturday night after he'd walked away from Billy in that clearing, something smokey like hurt curling in his stomach, and he hadn't really slept last night, either. He was thinking, last night, about the look on Tommy's face, like he knows something's wrong, like he's not sure if they're in a place, yet, where he can ask about it.

It's not even the nightmares. It is, sometimes, obviously. There are nights that Steve wakes up his empty house screaming, sweating. Nights where even with all the lights on, even with the tv on in the living room when he inevitably creeps down there, he can't sleep at all. There's a feeling like the scuttling of dried leaves across frozen grass under his skin. A feeling like the sound of claws on the earthen floor of a tunnel underground.

He can't stop fucking moving, not for a second.

When things hold still, that's when they die.

So Steve walks around his house, can't quite bring himself to leave it, and all the green and wet and bright of May can't chase away the

dark of 3am, when the skeleton trees haunt him, when something burns under his skin.

It's been three nights in a row, now, with very little fucking sleep and--

Steve's just really tired.

Steve doesn't know why, but he's pretty sure that Billy being outside that fair for two hours had something to do with how he couldn't sleep last night, with how it's 5:47 in the morning, now, and he's dripping sweat and running laps and dribbling because he can *feel* something burning under his skin and he can't get it out. Can't stop moving. Can't sleep. Can't--

Just. He can't.

Billy hadn't found the fence post and Steve should have waited, but his whole body had rebelled when Billy had been so casual, had said the only reason he'd broken up the fight was because of Max. Steve doesn't even know why, just that Billy spoke and Steve had felt like a door slammed shut on his finger. It hurt so sudden and so sharp.

He wonders, pausing at the three point line, letting the ball sail from his fingers, *swish*, if Billy's hardass dad had grounded him, or something, for sneaking away.

"Your form's getting better."

Steve looks up to find Billy standing in the door to the parking lot, framed in the barely-blue light of the dawn. He wonders for a second if in that tunnel he got something like El has, something that called Billy to him, because Steve's spent every second since Saturday practically screaming Billy's name in his head, just a constant loop of it, and now he's here. Right here in the gym before 6am.

Steve had propped that door open to get some air in, but the custodian always says, "Just you, Harrington," when he lets Steve in that early and he's going to be pissed if he finds Billy here, only Steve doesn't really care. He thinks that he conjured Billy.

He thinks he probably needs to fucking sleep and that Billy's just here

because he's here. Steve doesn't have powers and the gate is closed and Steve just needs to fucking *calm down* or whatever.

When Billy steps into the gym, he's walking a little gingerly. Steve focuses on that, watches him. Steve knows a fucked up rib when he sees one, mostly because Billy's knee digging in had come *this close* to cracking Steve's ribs, one winter night, and Steve had shuffled like that for *days* after.

"Cat got your tongue?" Billy asks.

Steve realizes he's been silent for like, a whole minute while Billy's been staring at him and he says, "You really fucked up my senior season," which isn't what he means to say, but.

"Not like you were any good," Billy says. He leans against the wall.

They both know he's wrong.

Steve says, "Wanna play a little one on one then, since you're so fucking good?" even though he knows Billy's ribs are fucked up.

He thinks Billy will say no to save face, but Billy says, "Yeah," and goes to pull his shirt off.

"I'm already skins," Steve says, motioning at his own bare chest.

Billy's eyes linger on him. Steve feels a flush spread down from his neck and doesn't get why it happens. Billy says, "Put your shirt on, pretty boy. I'm always skins."

"Not happening. You wanna play? You're wearing a shirt."

Billy says, "Fuck you," which means, *yeah sure* and it feels like he gave in too easy, but Steve can't figure out why.

It's a long and sweaty game. Even hurt, Billy plays well. It's super fucking annoying.

By the time the clock reads close to seven, though, Billy's doubled over, panting. His face twists in a grimace. Steve's standing near the hoop dribbling the ball like an asshole, just kind of watching. He's

honestly not sure if he's supposed to intervene and help him or if he should just wait until Billy stands up and wants to play again.

"You wanna just call it?" Steve asks after a while, dragging the back of his hand across his forehead. He's so sweaty and he's going to have to shower before class starts, anyway.

Billy doesn't say anything. Another few minutes pass before Steve's walking toward him, before Steve reaches a hand out--like he would with Tommy or with Dustin or with Jonathan--and places it on Billy's shoulder. "Seriously, you good?" Steve asks.

Billy flinches like Steve's stabbed him in the shoulder or something, straightens up and *shoves* Steve so fucking hard that he falls back on his ass on the gym floor. Then they're both breathing hard and they're both staring at each other and Billy doesn't say sorry, doesn't say *okay*, *I lose*, and doesn't say *fuck you* in a way that means yeah, sure.

Steve doesn't know why it feels, in this moment, like he wants to fucking *cry* or whatever, but maybe it's the bruised tailbone that he's definitely going to have now. Steve breathes in, breathes out, says, "Whatever, Billy. You're a fucking sore loser."

He's halfway to the locker room when he looks back over his shoulder and realizes Billy is on the ground.

Steve thinks, *I could just fucking leave him there*, and Steve thinks, *he just pushed me*, and Steve thinks, *he's not worth my fucking time*.

Steve turns around and walks back over to Billy. He holds a hand out and he remembers Billy throwing him back to the ground.

Steve thinks, *I could do that*.

Steve says, "You okay, man?"

Billy's breathing hard, but he gives a tight nod and grips Steve's arm. Steve pulls him to his feet and Billy hisses. "Jesus," Billy breathes out. He wraps his arm around his own waist, panting.

He's still holding on to Steve's arm, fingers curled tight around

Steve's skin, and he's already getting tanner. Steve wonders how much time Billy spends in the sun, wonders why he's the one with all the fucking moles when Billy's skin is going golden like that. Billy's clutching him like Steve's the only thing that's holding him up and so Steve doesn't pull away. He stands there, a little unsteady.

Not as fucking unsteady as he is when Billy makes a sound a little like a whimper and stumbles a half step forward, his sweaty forehead planting on Steve's shoulder.

Steve should probably pull away, should draw a line in the sand, should make a glib comment like, *what are you, gay or something?* except Steve kissed Tommy when they were twelve years old and Tommy made a face and they've never talked about it again and--

Billy smells kind of good and--

It's been a while since Steve got laid and--

Billy's breathing is really fucking unsteady, so maybe Steve should put a pin in thinking of all the things Billy could do with his dick and focus on the fact that he's never seen Billy Hargrove *lean* on someone before, but right the fuck now he's holding up a lot of Billy's weight.

"You wanna go to the hospital?" Steve asks, thinking about shrugging Billy off him.

He doesn't do that because. Well, he doesn't fucking want to. Anyone will tell you that Steve Harrington doesn't really do anything he doesn't want to do. That's why he's the fucking king.

"No," Billy breathes out.

"Who the fuck broke your ribs like that?"

"How'd you know it's my ribs?" Billy says, which is absolutely not an answer.

"Because you're walking like I did after you almost killed me, asshole, only you look worse."

"They're not broken," Billy says.

“Great,” Steve says. “Maybe you’re just a pussy then, or whatever. Listen, I’m going to shower, so--” he starts to pull away.

“Harrington,” Billy bites out, and it sounds like *please*.

“What, Billy?”

“I don’t think I can--”

“You want me to help you to the showers?”

“Fuck you.”

He means, *yeah, sure*.

Billy’s head is still on his shoulder, so it doesn’t take much to shift Billy in his grip, to get an arm around Billy and get himself supporting more of Billy’s weight. He gets Billy to the locker room and leans him up against the wall near where Billy’s basketball shit usually ends up.

Steve isn’t really sure what he’s supposed to do next. “Are you gonna--”

“No,” Billy says, shaking his head. He’s got his hands fisted in his sweaty t-shirt like he thinks Steve is going to rip it off him. Steve looks at him for a heartbeat and wonders what’s underneath, what those ribs really look like.

“Your clothes are disgusting,” Steve offers.

“Yeah,” Billy says, but he doesn’t do anything besides blink at Steve. “Go shower,” he says.

Steve does.

When he comes back, Billy’s gone. Steve doesn’t find him slumped over or on the floor anywhere on his way to classes, so he figures that Billy’s probably fine and gets back to his day.

~



Only all of the sudden it's 9pm on a Monday and Steve's so fucking tired and he just can't sleep. He's been trying since 7pm, testing a theory that if he got into bed while it was still light out he'd be okay. He isn't, okay. He still feels like there's something crawling under his skin.

On the worst nights, which tonight is shaping up to be, Steve wonders if maybe he inhaled something, if maybe in that tunnel something *did* get under his skin and it's only a matter of time.

He can't leave the house and go out into the darkness with no destination in mind. He grabs the cordless phone, takes a deep breath, and walks out to the pool. He wanders over to his favorite chair to sit on. He has half an idea to call Nancy, but they haven't really talked. He has half an idea to call Tommy and beg him to come over, but Steve's not sure they're there, yet. He just wants to sleep. He just wants to sleep. He just wants to--

"Motherfucker," says the thing Steve just sat on.

Steve scrambles off the lounge he'd just tried to drop into and blinks. "Billy?"

"Well if my ribs weren't broken before they sure as shit are now. Motherfucker. You're heavy for a skinny little fuck, Harrington."

Steve can't figure out why, for the second time in three days, Billy Hargrove is by his pool when Steve just wants to be alone. There's something crawling under his skin and he just wants it fucking *out*. "Why are you outside my house?"

Billy's sitting up now, at least. He's tilting his head up to look at Steve and his jaw is set like he's expecting a challenge or for Steve to start throwing punches. In the light from the house, Steve can see something that looks like a shadow across Billy's temple where it had rested on Steve's shoulder just this morning.

Maybe he's hallucinating, or something, and Billy isn't really here.

To test the theory, Steve kicks Billy in the leg.

"Ow!" Billy snarls, "What the actual fuck, Harrington?"

“What are you doing outside my house?” Steve asks, instead of saying anything else. It’s chilly, he realizes. He wishes he’d put on a sweater.

It’s chilly. Billy’s got the plaid on, again. Over a grey henley this time. It’s smart of him to layer, in this weather, that’s what Steve’s thinking.

Billy looks a little shifty. “Just sit down,” he says.

Steve--he does. He sits down. Billy says, “I shoved you this morning and I probably shouldn’t have, so.”

Steve waits. After a minute he says, “So like, are you going to say you’re sorry?”

“Didn’t I just fucking do that?”

“You didn’t actually, y’know, say anything?”

“Well take it or leave it, Jesus. I don’t care,” Billy says, but he’s toeing at the concrete and not meeting Steve’s eyes.

Steve says, “Apology accepted,” because one time he was nearly killed by a monster in a tunnel and one time Barb died in this pool, but not really in it, or whatever, so holding grudges seems stupid now.

“Why do you have a phone?”

“I was going to call Tommy,” Steve says.

“Doesn’t he fucking hate you?”

“We’re normal now.”

“Why the fuck would you forgive someone who hated you?”

Steve looks at Billy for a long heartbeat. “I forgave you, didn’t I?” he says. “For a lot worse. And anyway, Tommy’s been my best friend since we were five. Shit happens. That’s how friends work, right?”

Billy doesn’t say anything at all to that. Steve looks at him for a

second before he kind of slumps and leans their shoulders together. He's not sure why he does it, only that he likes the warmth from Billy's body, likes that the plaid is just as soft as he thought it would be where it brushes against Steve's arm, against all the skin his t-shirt leaves bare.

Steve is so fucking tired.

He's going to say something else, he is, only he doesn't. Billy talks for a while, Steve thinks, although he's not really sure what he talks about.

Steve shuts his eyes for just a second, but when he opens them he's lying on the lounge and the sun is coming up behind the trees.

He should be cold, but he isn't. When he sits up, he realizes it's because Billy's green plaid shirt is thrown over him. He looks around, but there's no sign of Billy at all. Steve puts the plaid on and it smells like cigarettes and like Billy's cologne, and it's so soft, and so warm.

The Camaro isn't in the driveway. Billy's gone, probably long gone. Steve wraps his arms around himself and feels the warmth from Billy's stupid plaid shirt and realizes that he's slept a full night for the first time in *days*.

He feels better, but not great. It's the only reason he goes to school, actually, Billy's plaid shirt balled up in his backpack.

He wants to see Billy.

Really, he wants to thank him.

No, actually, he really just wants to fucking see him.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

I'm @lymricks on tumblr, too :)

Also, sometime during dried up, half full I apparently decided I wanted to write friendship Tommy so like, here's some of that.

## 4. IV

### Notes for the Chapter:

Listen, I am so sorry. I can't believe how long it's been. I appreciate everyone who's been waiting and asking <3 you're all the best and I hope you like it.

When Billy got home from Harrington's house last night, minus his favorite fucking plaid shirt, the soft green one that was his mom's boyfriend's, or something, but that reminds him of home, his dad was still up and that wasn't a great thing, because Billy's getting a lot of bruises lately and people are going to start asking questions.

He'd sneered that warning at his dad from the floor, blood on his face, on his dad's knuckles, and that had also been a problem, because his dad doesn't like it when Billy talks back.

When Billy gets to school the next morning his lip is still split and there's a bruise with a big red slash across it from his dad's ring and shit just is what it is. It's early, Hawkins High is empty, the Camaro's the only car in the parking lot. Billy's starting to associate Harrington with early mornings, which is weird. Billy's not exactly a morning person, but the earlier he gets up and gets out of the house, the safer he tends to be, so he's always kind of done mornings by default.

He's never had anyone he wanted to *see* this early, though.

He actually probably shouldn't have left Harrington asleep out by the pool last night, Billy's thinking, because he kind of wants to see him now. If Harrington froze to death out by the pool there's no way that he's going to show up at Hawkins High at--Billy pauses, checks his watch--5:23 in the morning.

Billy hates not getting what he fucking *wants*.

It was pretty cold last night, Billy thinks. Harrington could've frozen to death. Of course, Billy's from California and Harrington grew up in Indiana, so maybe it wasn't cold to him and he'd just slept in, or something.

Billy thinks that he probably shouldn't be *annoyed* that Harrington slept late enough to *not* be at school at 5:23 in the morning because it doesn't seem like Harrington sleeps much, honestly. Still. It's cold and Billy's in a jean jacket over a white shirt and he'd *never* wear the plaid to school, but he misses it. Last night it had seemed like a nice thing to do, give Harrington the plaid so he wouldn't freeze to death, but Billy probably should've just carried it into the house or something because.

Well. He misses it.

Billy's just lit a cigarette and is lying back on the hood of the Camaro and waiting for something to happen when he hears another car. Billy hears the engine cut, a car door open and close, the sound of footsteps. "Didn't think you were coming," Billy says, exhaling a stream of smoke at the sky.

There's a huff of air like someone laughing and the footsteps stop right at the hood of his car and when Billy looks up, Harrington's looking back at him. He looks, Billy thinks, a little less tired than normal. Billy thinks, *I did that* and he's not used to doing something good for someone just fucking because, but Harrington looks better and Billy--Billy did that.

Billy tips his head to really look at him, to get a better view, and that's when he realizes that Harrington's wearing the shirt.

It looks good on him, honestly. It's better suited to someone a little soft and no one has ever mistaken Billy for soft, not since he was nine years old and knocked out both of Dillon Anderson's front teeth because he said *my dad says that your mom is a crazy bitch*. It wasn't that Dillon had been wrong, exactly. It was more that Billy's never allowed anyone except his dad to talk shit about his mom.

Anyway, the point is that the shirt looks good on Harrington and that's a *problem* for Billy because he's known it since the fucking county fair, hasn't he, that he *likes* Steve Harrington.

It's why he drove over to his house on a school night or whatever, when he's not supposed to do that, when he's supposed to help Max with her homework, because Billy doesn't feel safe in his house, he

felt safer sleeping on a pool chair out behind Harrington's house than he did in his own goddamn bed.

Only then Harrington had sat on him and ruined the whole thing, only then he'd fallen asleep against Billy, only then he'd been shivering a little, so Billy had wrapped him in that plaid shirt and gone home and. Well.

Billy can't stop doing shit he's not supposed to. It's not like he doesn't know what'll happen.

"You look like shit," Harrington says.

Billy doesn't need to see himself in a mirror to know that Harrington is looking at the bruise that's on his jaw. Billy can feel it. He drags his tongue across his lips and sits up. Harrington goes a little less sideways, which is a plus. "Got into a fight," he says, he always says, every time. Who wouldn't believe it?

Harrington blinks at him. "You got into a fight after you left my house. In Hawkins? Where?"

Harrington, apparently. Harrington wouldn't believe it. Billy drags his tongue across his bottom lip again, says, "There's trouble everywhere, if you go looking for it."

"You are not actually as dangerous as you're trying to make yourself sound," Harrington says, rolling his eyes, but he drops it, like maybe Billy actually is dangerous enough to go out and pick a fight after dark in Hawkins, Indiana.

Billy cuts his glance away, looks out over the parking lot, and Harrington settles down on the hood of his car, right next to him. Their thighs are almost touching. Billy *knows* he's imagining it, but it's a little bit like he can feel the warmth from Harrington's skin. It's kind of soothing. Billy doesn't find a lot of shit soothing, most days, but for some reason Harrington's thigh, the denim of his jeans, the way that he should be cold in nothing but a t-shirt and Billy's plaid, but isn't, that's soothing.

Billy wonders if Harrington would run him over, if he asked. He says,

“Most people ask before they sit on my fucking car,” because he is dangerous, and he thinks that maybe Harrington should know what he’s getting himself into.

Harrington doesn’t say anything, and Billy doesn’t want to, but he can’t help it, he turns and looks at him, tries to read in his face what he can’t read in his silence.

The corner of Harrington’s mouth quirks up, like he was waiting for Billy to do that, like it was part of his plan all along. “I’m not most people,” Harrington says and Billy thinks, no shit.

They don’t actually talk after that. Harrington offers him a cigarette and Billy accepts it. The morning gets a little warmer, the sun a little more insistent, and the goosebumps on Billy’s skin finally go away. Every now and again he can’t help but look at Harrington.

Every time a cloud moves out of the way, Harrington tips his head back to get the sun on his face and he closes his eyes and his lips part a little. It’s a fucking pretty picture. Billy wonders if Harrington would hold still like that while he runs to the drugstore to get a camera, or something.

Billy wonders if Harrington really knows what he’s doing, who Billy is, the shit that he’s into.

The people that he’s into.

Probably he doesn’t, because this is Hawkins, Indiana, and for whatever reason, Steve Harrington wanders around like a lost little boy outside his pool and picks fights with men three times his size for shits and giggles. Harrington’s got baggage and Billy’s not sure he wants that, except Harrington’s bottom lip looks perfect for biting, so that’s going to be a problem.

Billy knows he shouldn’t want anything to do with this, that’s what his dad always says, but his dad saying *stop* has only ever made Billy’s foot press down on the gas.

He’s thinking about his dad and about California and about Harrington’s fucking mouth, which is maybe why he misses it or

doesn't notice it, but a car pulls up, and it's too fucking *late*, but Billy appreciates the effort when Max says, "No, Neil, this is the *high school*--"

Billy's head whips around and he looks right at his dad through the rolled-down window of his truck. His dad's mad that he had to drive Max, Billy knows. His dad's mad that Billy left so early, but his dad is always mad about shit like that. Now, though, there's two spots of red sitting high on his cheeks, and that's real anger, the twist in his mouth and the way his eyes narrow just slightly.

His dad isn't looking at Billy.

He's look a little to Billy's side, where Steve Harrington's a pretty fucking picture with his eyes closed and his head tipped back.

Wearing Billy's shirt.

There's something in Billy's stomach that goes hard and a little icy, frozen, and he keeps looking at his dad and his dad looks at him. Billy knows what happens next, what happens when he gets home.

Over his dad's shoulder, Max is looking frantic in the passenger's seat, and Billy appreciates her effort, he really does, when she grabs his dad's shoulder and says, "Neil, sorry, my meeting with my teacher is in like, ten minutes--"

"Right," his dad says, and his voice sends fear flickering through Billy's body like sparks, burning him down to his bone marrow. "Of course, Maxine." His dad is looking right at him, though, "I'll see you when you get home, Billy. Right after school."

Billy has plans after school and his dad knows it because he'd asked before he left the house this morning, sort of. Announced, but in a questioning sort of way. So his dad knows he has plans and now, also, he thinks Billy's fucking Steve Harrington.

The truck drives away and when Billy finally turns his head to look over at Harrington, Harrington's looking right back, something on his face a little bit confused and Billy thinks that's sweet, almost, that Harrington doesn't know what's going on.



“Give me my fucking shirt back,” Billy says, looking Harrington right in his big dumb brown eyes. “And get the *fuck* off my car.”

His dad’s not here to see it, but at least Billy can say, *it’s nothing, sir* and not be lying.

His dad fucking hates it when he lies.

~

Billy wants to walk out of the building about thirty minutes through second period, where the teacher won’t stop talking about Scout’s relationship with Atticus, or whatever. Billy wants to tell her that it’s not even ten in the morning, yet, and some people’s parents would hit them if they called them by their first names, and some people *remember* their dead moms, and it fucking sucks, but if he says all that they’ll call his dad and also they’ll probably wonder if his dad hits him more than a normal amount, so Billy doesn’t say any of that.

He sits and he seethes and he knows he’s not angry, he’s fucking scared, because his dad thinks he’s being gay again, or whatever, and they already moved once for that, and how many times is his dad going to be willing to move when he could, theoretically, at some point, just get rid of Billy?

Billy’s not even sure that anyone would fucking *notice*.

He can’t walk out of school, though, because he’s already in trouble, and that’ll just piss his dad off more. Billy can hear him, what he’d say, *you can’t even face the consequences of your actions without acting like a pussy*, and honestly, he wouldn’t even be wrong. Billy’s so scared that he might throw up or something equally fucking stupid, but he’s broken all three pencils he’s stolen from the backpack of the girl in front of him, so he’s not really sure what to do.

Second period ends, finally, with the assertion that Atticus is a good father, and Billy wants to tell the teacher, *hey, you stupid bitch, in California I read this book when I was twelve, can none of these dumb hicks read?*, but it’s not her fault, really, so he just walks out of the classroom and shoulders especially hard at a few freshman who walk by.

He sort of expects Harrington to stay away from him, honestly, because he'd moved too slow when Billy had told him to give him his shirt and get off his car, and Billy had shoved him, and Steve's palms had been all scratched up from where he'd caught himself as he hit the ground, but there's someone bobbing, right now, keeping pace with Billy just behind his shoulder and he knows there's only one person it could be.

"Harrington, did you not understand when I told you to *fuck off*?" Billy grits out.

"I mean, I didn't understand when you told me to get off your car, so probably not," Harrington offers, like it's all hilarious, "Also, you didn't actually tell me to fuck off."

"I'm telling you now, then," Billy says.

"You actually aren't, though," Harrington answers, and Billy's already in trouble so maybe it doesn't matter if his dad calls him a pussy tonight. He spins on his heel and stomps out the side door, out into the soccer field next to the school. He's supposed to take Max home, but maybe he can hide out under the bleachers or something, or in the woods. It's Indiana. There's enough fucking woods for everyone. Maybe Harrington will go and find his own.

Harrington follows him. They're in the middle of the soccer field and Billy's walking fast, hoping that no one will be looking out the window, because he doesn't want to get caught. Billy keeps walking.

"You still haven't told me to fuck off," Harrington points out once they're across the field, once Billy's ducking under the away team bleachers.

Billy takes out a cigarette, tries to light it, but his hands are shaking and it's complicated. He throws it on the ground in frustration, then goes for another one, then realizes his pack is fucking *empty*, and then he throws that, too, and he's dimly aware he's having a temper tantrum, but he honestly doesn't know what to do with all the shit in his chest and his brain.

"Here," Harrington says, and he's holding out a cigarette, which Billy

takes and sets between his lips. Harrington leans in and cups his hand to block the wind, lights it, and Billy inhales, but it doesn't actually make him feel any better, not even when he lets the smoke sit in his lungs, not even when he breathes it out.

Harrington takes a few steps back, like he thinks that Billy needs space, or something.

"If you were going to hide a body in Hawkins, where would you do it?" Billy asks conversationally.

Harrington thinks about it, "The quarry, probably," he says. "It's a little cliché, but it'll get the job done."

"My dad thinks I'm letting you fuck me," Billy says, "And he's a little cliché, so check there first if I'm not at school tomorrow."

He's not looking at Harrington when he says it, because it's easier that way, and Billy's never actually *told* anyone that, but also he's scared, so.

Harrington doesn't say anything, and Billy thinks he might be doing that thing where he's silent so Billy will look at him, so Billy does, but when Billy looks at him Harrington's face is white and his lips are pressed into a thin line and Billy thinks that he didn't even *think* to ask if Harrington hated fags, or whatever, and that was probably an oversight.

Billy taps ash off the end of the last cigarette Harrington's probably ever going to give him and doesn't say anything at all.

"Why would he think that?" Harrington finally says, which is a confusing question, but also he doesn't actually live inside Billy's brain, no matter how much Billy apparently thinks about him, so maybe it's fair.

"Because this morning you were wearing my shirt and also I like dick?" Billy says.

"Oh," Harrington says. "Shit."

"Yeah," Billy agrees.

Harrington's face has got a little of its color back, but there's something tight around his jaw. "You think he'll actually kill you?"

Billy shrugs. "Hasn't yet," he says, going for blasé, but the emphasis sort of ends up falling on the *yet*, so he might as well have just said, yeah, maybe.

"So you've been lying about getting into fights?"

"I don't fucking *lie*," Billy says, because his dad hates liars, and Billy is like his dad in a few ways that he really hates, and that's one of them.

"But your dad beats you up."

"Yeah, because I run my fucking mouth, pretty boy."

"Or because you like dick," Harrington says, which kind of takes the wind out of Billy's sails. "I like dick too, just in case you're wondering."

Which *really* takes the wind out of Billy's sails. "No shit," he says.

"No shit," Harrington agrees.

"Well we can't start fucking," Billy says. "Sorry, farm boy."

"Farm boy? I thought I was pretty a second ago."

"Yeah, well, shit changes."

"So we can't fuck because I'm a farm boy?" Harrington asks.

"No," Billy says, sighing. "We can't fuck because I'm going to tell my dad we're not fucking and I hate liars."

Harrington says, "Just don't go home."

Billy laughs, "That's not actually an option," he says, and his voice is a little less mean than he wants it to be, because he'd meant *that's stupid*, but his tone sounds a little bit more like, *thanks for trying*.

"Shit," Harrington says.

“Yeah,” Billy agrees.

Harrington stays with him there for the rest of the day, says no one is home to get a call from the school that he’s skipping class or the Saturday detention they’ll both get for skipping so many classes. They don’t really talk about anything. Billy smokes all of Harrington’s cigarettes, and eventually his hands stop shaking.

Harrington walks him to his car and he says, “So listen, I totally forgot I was helping Max with her homework yesterday.”

Billy says, “What?”

And Harrington says, “I was helping Max with her homework yesterday, so I have to bring her textbook back to her tonight, but I’m busy until like, nine. So if I bring it by tonight, is that cool? I’ll just sit outside and honk my horn a few times and you can come get it for her. She’s a little girl, so she shouldn’t be walking outside alone that late.”

Billy looks at him for a long minute, says, “Nine?” a little more like *please* than he’ll ever admit.

“Yeah, unless earlier is better for you.”

“No,” Billy says. “Nine--nine is, that’s good.”

“Great,” Harrington says, and then he says, “I’ll see you then,” like it’s a promise.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

I'm also @lymricks on tumblr

## 5. V

Steve's car breaks down at 8:24pm on his way to Billy's house, and that's just fucking *wonderful*. He's only about a mile from Tommy's, though, so he locks the door, grabs his backpack, and walks.

By 8:42, he's pounding on Tommy's front door. It's not light out, anymore. The walk along the edges of the road where the trees bowed in greeting has him right out on the fucking edge, his teeth gritted, his fingers nervous where they clutch his backpack straps at his shoulder or drum against his thigh.

Tommy's mom opens the door and seeing her has almost the same feeling as exhaling. Steve shoots her his brightest, most charming smile. She heaves a sigh. "Steve," she says, stepping back and waving him into the house despite the disapproval in her voice. "It's very late for visitors."

"I know, Denise," Steve says. "I'm sorry. It's just, my car broke down and I really need to be--somewhere, can Tommy give me a ride?"

Tommy's mom looks at him for a long moment, then rolls her eyes. She's all affection when she pinches his cheek. Denise has always been his biggest fan, the pinnacle of what he's always thought a mother should be. His own mom falls pretty short of the standard Denise has set, but she's known Steve since he was still saying his own name as *Stebe* and so he's never felt like anything less than her son. "Of course he can, honey," she says, dropping her hand. "Tommy, baby," she calls into the house, "Steve's here!"

"Thanks, Denise. I appreciate it," Steve says.

"It's no problem, honey," she says, and that's always been true, too, that he's *honey* and Tommy's *baby* and it's weird how some shit just never changes. "Can I get you anything?"

Steve's eyes drift to the huge grandfather clock just beyond them in the hallway. It's ugly and looming, all dark wood and ostentatious roman numerals. When he and Tommy had been thirteen, they'd been throwing a basketball around the house and broken the clock

face. There's still a crack spider-webbed across the glass.

It's an heirloom, or something. Denise had grounded them both for three weeks. That is--in retrospect--kind of weird, considering Steve didn't live in her house. It had stuck, though, the grounding. He hadn't left his house after school and he'd crossed off all three weeks on the calendar as they days passed.

They also hadn't ever played ball in her house again.

The clock reads 8:45. "No, thank you," Steve says. "I really have somewhere I have to be."

Tommy comes around the corner, then. He's in sweats and a Hawkins t-shirt that Steve is *pretty sure* is his. "Hey," Tommy greets, his eyes sliding from Steve to his mom and back.

This is so automatic for both of them, Steve thinks, this friendship. It smacks them both in the face sometimes how fragile things are, right now. He wishes a breakfast at the diner had just fixed everything. It hasn't, but still. Steve knows this friendship on an instinctual level.

Of course Steve had walked to Tommy's house when his car broke down. Of course Tommy's going to give him a ride. That's the kind of bullshit they agreed to when they were still too little to walk alone at night. It's just--weird, still, in the aftermath of *everything*, of months of not really talking, of--just feeling like *shit*.

It's automatic, so Tommy says, "Your car broke down? Let me get my keys," because his room is close enough to the hallway that he can hear *every* conversation from the front door. Steve knows this because Tommy has an older sister--off at college now--and they used to try and catch her meeting boyfriends. She couldn't get them in trouble for it because, "What are you talking about? We were just in my *room*," had the double benefit of being both true and innocuous.

Steve gets a hug and a wet kiss on the cheek from Denise, an order to come for dinner sometime that week, and then he gets into Tommy's car. He exhales the second he's settled into the seat, because with the windows and a car door between him and the forest, shit seems a little less scary.

The clock on Tommy's dash says 8:49pm.

"Where are we going?" Tommy asks. "The shop in town is probably closed, but we can maybe get Eric Dade's brother to come and--"

"Billy Hargrove's house," Steve says. "I'll give you directions if you don't know where it is. Tommy--I need you to get us there by nine."

Tommy looks at Steve for a moment, then he looks at the clock, then he looks at Steve. There isn't a second of that moment where Steve worries that Tommy is going to say no. "Sure," Tommy says.

His car, at least, isn't slow. Tommy runs two red lights and gets a blaring honk from Mrs. Hodgkins who lives out near Old Cherry and has hated Tommy since he picked some of her flowers for Carol a few years back. The clock says 9:03 when they pull up outside of Billy's house. Steve hesitates, then he gets out of the car. "Lay on your horn," he says.

"What the *fuck*, Steve?" Tommy asks, but he does it anyway.

There's movement by a back window. Steve watches as Billy Hargrove literally tumbles out into the grass. For a moment he doesn't move and Steve thinks that he might have to go and like, pick Billy up, or something, but then Billy's staggering to his feet, stumbling down the side of the yard.

He stops short about a foot away when he sees Tommy, there. Billy's walk is slow, his arms are curled around his waist like he's protecting something. His face twists, anger, *rage*.

"What the *fuck* audience?"

Steve takes a half-step back, thinks he should've planted his goddamn feet instead. "No," he says. His eyes dart up to the house. "Get in the car, Billy."

"Fuck you," Billy spits. "I didn't agree to someone else being here."

"Okay," Steve says. "So what's your next move? You gonna go knock on your own front door? I gotta be honest with you, man. It doesn't look like you're climbing back in that window."



Billy's mouth opens, then he snaps it shut. He grits his teeth. "I don't fucking trust him," he snarls.

*But I trusted you* hangs unsaid--implied--in the air between them.

"Yeah," Steve says. "I get that, only I do trust him, so."

"I don't care," Billy snaps, and Steve thinks it's an improvement that he didn't say, *fuck* this time.

Steve's eyes dart nervously to the house. He can see movement behind the curtains. There's no way of knowing if it's the dad Billy said a few hours ago might actually kill him, but Steve doesn't keep the bat in *Tommy's* car, so they really need to get a fucking move on.

"Listen," Steve says. "When I was like--" he glances over his shoulder through the open window at Tommy, "Twelve?" he asks, "Or eleven?"

Tommy's eyes meet his for a second, hold his gaze. "Three days before your twelfth birthday," he clarifies.

"Right," Steve says. He turns back to Billy, "Okay, so when I was like, almost twelve? Tommy and I were playing football. I wanted to make the eighth grade team and he was helping. I tackled him--"

"It was a shitty tackle. I *let* you do it," Tommy interrupts.

"That is the *least* important thing about this story!"

"It's important to me, Stevie boy," Tommy says, and he flips Steve off.

"Okay, so Tommy *let* me tackle him, and I'm like, breathing hard, and he's breathing hard, and we're both sweaty, and I don't know, I was-- I was nervous, or whatever, and *thinking--*"

"He kissed me," Tommy interrupts, "We don't have time for a fucking novel, Steve. Hargrove, he kissed me, and I've never told anyone, and someone is about to open the door to that fucking house, so would you both just get in the goddamn car?"

Steve's never seen Billy Hargrove look as surprised as he looks right now, but he doesn't have time to appreciate it because Tommy's right. Steve grabs Billy by the wrist, shoves him in the front seat, and dives into the back. Tommy peels away from the curb with the door still halfway open and Steve scrambles to shut it. "What the fuck, Tommy!" he says, "This is Denise's car!"

"You and my mom have a really fucking weird relationship," Tommy says, "But if Billy's dad is gonna shoot a gun at us or something, I'd like to be really *on the way* out of here, so maybe shut the door a little faster next time, asshole."

Tommy lets out a woop, then, delighted. He rolls down the window and sticks his arm out it, fingers catching in the slow, warm-ish breeze of nighttime in Hawkins.

Billy is silent in the passenger's seat and Steve sits forward, knows he must look exactly like Carol as he does it. He pokes his head between Billy and Tommy's faces.

Billy's expression is stone cold, rigid, his jaw wound tight. Steve can see anger in the corners of his mouth, though, but when he glances down, Billy's got his fingers curled tight in his own t-shirt, and there Steve can see fear.

"Where are we going?" Tommy asks. Steve looks at him and his expression is easy. Tommy likes the drama of a night like this and Steve knows him well enough to know he doesn't give two shits about what Billy and Steve are going to do when they get wherever they're going.

Steve wishes he fucking knew where they were *going*, and he means that in the figurative sense, which Nancy would probably be proud of him for, maybe.

"My house," Steve says.

"Mom's going to be disappointed that you aren't sleeping over," Tommy says, because Steve does, all the time, even though they're both probably too old for sleepovers, now. Even though things have been fucking *weird* for months. It's just that sometimes Steve's house

is big and empty and the shadows make him feel sick to his stomach and he knows exactly the right number of blankets to pile up on Tommy's floor--and which closets to find them in--to be comfortable when he sleeps there.

He has a system. Tommy thinks it's stupid, but it's a good system and so Steve has always let himself rely on that system to feel good, to feel better. Still, it's not a night for Tommy's house, not with Billy in the car, not with him stumbling down from his house like that, and not with the set of his jaw or his silence, both of which feel dangerous.

When Steve had knocked on Tommy's door he'd felt on the edge of something. He feels on the edge of something again. He shivers, goosebumps rising on his skin, and waits to see what Billy thinks of this plan.

Only Billy still doesn't say a fucking word, so Steve has to assume he's on board with the plan. Tommy cruises through his neighborhood like he owns it, takes all the curves with the kind of speed that comes with familiarity, pulls up outside of Steve's house and then he looks over his shoulder at Steve like, *what's next?*

Steve climbs out of the car. Billy doesn't move. Steve rolls his eyes and yanks the door open. Steve looks past Billy to meet Tommy's eyes. "Thanks," he says. He means it. He's so fucking grateful. "Listen, you gotta keep this between us."

It's their code for *this is something you can't tell Carol* and Steve only breaks it out when he really means it.

Tommy watches him for a second, then he nods.

Steve startles when Tommy's gaze shifts to Billy, when Tommy's hand shoots out and he fists a hand in Billy's shirt. "He's my best friend," Tommy says, "And you fucking hurt him, so let me make something clear to you, Hargrove," and Tommy shifts his weight, gets up in Billy's face, and Steve's whole brain screams *danger*. "I'm going to *fuck you up* if you hurt him again. I'm not like our little kingling over here," he nods at Steve, "I'll fuck you up. We clear?"

Steve is pretty sure that Billy could kill--well, actually, he's not. Tommy's vicious in a fight. Always has been. Steve privately thinks he learned it from Carol. Tommy doesn't fight much, but he fights brutal, so he doesn't need to fight much.

Steve wonders how he ended up with so many friends who fight brutal, who fight *better* than him.

He wonders when he started thinking with such certainty that Billy is his friend.

He *also* wonders if Billy's going to throw a punch, but he just nods, once, tightly, and then he shoves past Steve and gets out of the car. Steve stumbles a few steps back and glares. "Rude," he says, but he glances at Tommy, holds his gaze for a second, and nods. "We're good here," Steve says. "Thanks, man."

"Call if you need me," Tommy says. There was a time when it didn't need saying, but Steve is grateful for the way it's in the air now, the way it confirms what he knows to be true. Lately, Steve's needed a lot of confirmation about things he thought were true.

"Yeah," Steve agrees and then he's watching Tommy drive away. Billy is wavering on his feet, a little, breathing too hard. Steve's familiar enough with panic to know what this is. He places his palm between Billy's shoulder blades and shoves him--mostly gently--toward the house. "It's fine," Steve says. "He's not gonna tell anyone."

Billy looks skeptical, but he nods.

When they're in the house, with all the lights on, Steve grabs two glasses and a good bottle of scotch from his dad's office and says, "Let's sit out by the pool."

He drags two loungers together when they get out there. Billy settles on one, Steve on the other. Steve pours two glasses and sets the bottle between them. Billy downs the glass, reaches for the bottle, takes a long pull. He's wincing, dragging his tongue across his lower lip when he sets the bottle back down.

"How bad?" Steve asks. "Guess I don't have to tell the cops to drag the quarry for your body."

"Not this time, pretty boy," Billy says, which is the first thing he's said in a while. He's grimacing, but Steve stares at him until Billy heaves a sigh and pulls his shirt up.

His chest and ribs are bruised, but that's not what makes Steve flinch. It's the burns--there's four of them. They're from a cigar, Steve things, and they're clustered in the space between Billy's ribs. He sucks in a sharp breath.

"It was a warning," Billy says, his voice hollow. "Stay away from boys like you, keep on the straight and narrow." He pauses, "At least I wasn't lying to him."

Steve has no fucking idea what to say. It isn't like he'd thought Billy was *joking* about his fear, but this is--that's fucking-- "Shit," Steve breathes.

Billy snorts.

Steve wonders if he should offer to get Billy some ice, or something, but Billy looks comfortable and Steve doesn't want to disturb him, or something so he shuts his eyes and slumps back against the chair. There's silence between them for a while, just the sound of the water, of insects in the forest. Steve feels exhausted. He doesn't know what happens tomorrow. This is a temporary fix, this--their second night out by the pool--and tomorrow will bring school, will bring practice, will bring Billy back to his own house, probably.

But maybe they can have this. The peace of a house Billy's made un-empty with his presence, the blue glow of a pool that Steve's less afraid of, now.

Steve stands up.

Billy's eyes are closed, but he tips his head toward him. "Where're you going?" he asks, and he sounds like he's maybe falling asleep. Steve envies him that--and only that--and wonders what it's like to just drift off.

“Just moving,” Steve says, and he stretches his arms over his head. Billy eyes stay closed, so he doesn’t see it when Steve shifts so he’s facing him, he doesn’t know Steve’s moving until Steve settles, straddling Billy’s hips on the lounge, his back to the pool.

Billy’s eyes open, then. “What are you doing?” Billy asks. “You can’t,” he adds, but his hands settle on Steve’s hips, and Steve feels where his fingers slide under the hem of his t-shirt, brush warm and rough in little circles against Steve’s skin.

Steve shifts his weight, rocks their hips together, and Billy lets out a breathy little exhale. “I can’t,” Billy says.

Steve leans down, close enough that their lips are almost touching, but not quite. He rolls his hips down into Billy’s again, heat pooling in his stomach.

“Harrington,” Billy says, his voice a little strained, “I *can’t*.”

Steve lifts his hand to cup Billy’s cheek, cradles it in his palm, and then he leans down and brushes their lips together. “We can’t,” Steve agrees, feels Billy’s mouth against his, feels Billy’s fingers pushing up under his shirt, tracing over his waist, the small of his back. This time, when Steve moves, he grinds his hips down into Billy’s and they both groan, quiet, breathy. “Except maybe tonight, maybe just tonight--”

Billy’s silent, for a second and Steve thinks he’d read the whole fucking situation wrong, but then Billy’s got a hand in his hair and he’s licking into Steve’s mouth like he owns the place, and Steve moans for him, loud and needy, because they’re out by the pool and there’s no one who can hear.

They can take tonight, Steve thinks. They can figure out tomorrow--

Well, tomorrow. They can figure everything out tomorrow.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

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@lymricks

## 6. vi

Billy wakes up a little cold, a little sweaty. Harrington's asleep on his chest, drooling on his shoulder. They're both too big for this, Billy thinks, for sleeping on a lounge outside the pool, but it's the second time it's happened. Only this time, Harrington's sleeping *on top of him*. He's definitely too big for it, lanky, the inch he's got on Billy is obvious in the awkward way he fits against Billy, but it's nice, too. It's awkward, but it works.

For a second, Billy thinks Harrington woke him up, but in the distance he hears thunder, and it must've been that. It doesn't rain much, out in Billy's part of California, so even though it's quiet--even though it's distant--the thunder is unusual. Makes his heart beat a little faster in his chest. It sounds like a warning, like the promise of something coming that he doesn't really understand.

Billy shifts.

The burns on his chest throb from the heat of being trapped between two bodies, but they'll feel better once Steve's off him. Billy's trapped in that sweaty place of just waking up, the world blurry at the edges. Soon he'll be aware enough to hate the way that his body feels sticky, but not just yet. He could talk himself out of hating it. He could fall back asleep, thunderstorm be damned. It sounds far away, still. Billy hasn't even seen lightning yet.

Harrington makes a noise and shuffles a little. His mouth ends up plastered against Billy's throat. His breath is hot, his lips a little damp. It's probably really *gross*, but it's also kind of endearing.

His mom had taught him that word, endearing. He'd been six, maybe, and his dad had been mad about something like Billy putting on mascara or lipstick or wrapping himself in one of her scarves and his mom had said no, Neil, it's not wrong, it's *endearing* and it's just a *phase*. Billy's cheeks had been pink, not from blush, but from the stinging flat of his dad's palm.

And *now* he's fucking awake and so aware of all the sticky sweat clinging to his body and he's pretty sure there's *no way* he's going to

be able to get Harrington off his chest without waking him up, but his jeans feel fucking *awful* and Billy feels like he's dying or hungover or both.

Billy manages it by practically dropping Harrington on the ground before kind of tossing him back onto the lounge, but Harrington's sleeping like the dead, which is a little disconcerting. It's not even like they'd *fucked*. They didn't even get *off*. They just made out for a while, until Harrington was as sleepy, as droopy as Billy, and then they'd fallen asleep.

It's honestly so gross, and Billy's not even just thinking about the sweat. At least in California it'd been about *sex*. This was--just about--*fuck*. This was just about how Billy had followed along with shit because Harrington was warm and would probably fall asleep on top of him. Billy had known known it would happen. He'd maybe hoped it would. It's probably not fair that he's so fucking disconcerted by it now but, he is. So.

He should leave, Billy thinks as he looks down at Steve. He should leave. Go home and tell his dad he fucked some cow from Hawkins, which would have the added shock value of grossing Susan out and making Max look away. That's what he should do.

So Billy wanders into Harrington's house, and he's going to leave, he is, but his skin is sticky with sweat, so he wanders up the stairs, takes them two at a time, and finds himself in the bathroom.

He tells himself it's something like a halfway point between leaving--which he's going to do--and staying. At least he's not getting drooled on anymore.

He lets the water run cold because it feels good on his sticky skin, on his burns and his bruises. It feels something like relief, even if it doesn't last long.

Billy turns the water off, looks at the pile of his gross and sticky clothes, and leaves them there on the floor. He walks past them, down the hall, into the bedroom that's Harrington's. He digs through drawers until he finds some sweats that don't scream *Hawkin's Pride* or something bullshit like that and then he--



And then he goes back downstairs, because he's not leaving. Clearly.

He's pretty sure they should go to school, but when he opens the door to the pool, Harrington's sitting down on the edge of it, trailing one hand lazily through the water. In the other, he's holding a glass of something that Billy is almost positive is booze.

Way out past the line of trees, thunder keeps rumbling.

Billy takes a few quick steps forward. Harrington's not looking at him, so he's surprised, probably, when Billy snatches the glass out of his hand. He has to wrap his fingers around Billy's leg to stop himself from toppling over into the pool.

"You shouldn't sneak up on people like that, what the fuck," Harrington says.

"You shouldn't be drinking whiskey before the sun's up," Billy says, and it's good shit, too, slides warm all the way down to his stomach. "Or in the water when there's a storm coming."

Harrington shrugs. "You see my mom around anywhere?" he asks, and he takes the glass back, and then *downs it*.

Billy has literally never been in the position where he's expected to be the good influence, but what he hears himself saying is, "We have school today."

Harrington shrugs again. He rolls the glass in his hand, watches the drop or two left in the bottom slide along the inside of the glass with the motion of his wrist. Billy thinks for a second that he's maybe fallen asleep doing it because Harrington goes *that quiet*, but he finally says, "Fuck school," and then he's getting to his feet, and he's a little wobbly, and Billy wonders how many glasses he's *had* while Billy was in the shower.

Harrington chases those last few drops with his finger, licks it off, and smiles at Billy, but there's something off about it, and Billy's never been in the position to be a good influence, but he finds himself taking the glass from Harrington and setting it down by the edge of the pool.

“Fuck school,” Billy echoes, but then he’s grabbing Harrington’s wrist. He curls his fingers around it, presses his thumb against Harrington’s pulse. It’s rapid fire, and Harrington’s looking at him with his eyes big and stupid and his lips a little parted, and Billy wonders, for a second, if Harrington can summon a storm.

Because there’s something in him like a storm, Billy can see it in his eyes, and Billy’s never met a fire he wants to put out, but he doesn’t want Harrington to burn away, and now he’s mixing metaphors, but Harrington looks at him like he’s all mixed up, like he’s waiting for Billy to tell him what to do. Like he’ll *listen*.

“Come to bed,” Billy says, like it’s his house, like Billy has any right to be saying that. When he takes a step back, though, towards the slider, Harrington follows. He falls into step with Billy, and once the carpet is below their feet, once the living room has them, Harrington fumbles around behind him and shuts the slider, locks it.

“What do we do now?” Harrington asks, and he’s drunk, Billy realizes.

“I think we put you to bed,” Billy says.

“Good influence doesn’t really suit you, amigo,” Harrington says, and Billy wonders if he can read his mind. Billy wonders, too, what his dad would say if he saw them here, close enough they’re sharing air, Billy still holding Harrington’s risk.

They both jump when the thunder booms, suddenly so close. Behind Harrington, the sky opens, rain smacking against concrete, against glass.

“Ever seen a tornado?” Harrington asks.

Billy is suddenly so tired of this conversation, which feels rooted in something like fear. “No, and I don’t fucking want to. Cut the crap and get your ass upstairs,” Billy snaps, and he doesn’t really expect it when Harrington just kind of listens.

In the upstairs hallway, Harrington hesitates at the threshold of his room, stares at his bed like it’s hurt him. “I don’t want to feel like this

anymore,” he says, and he says it so quietly that Billy isn’t even sure Harrington’s talking to him.

Still, Billy steps up behind him and the rain thunders against the roof, and he says, “Like what, Harrington?” and Harrington takes a half step back, sags against Billy’s chest. The heat of him makes the burns ache again, but Billy winds an arm around his waist, hooks his chin over Harrington’s shoulder. “Like what?” Billy says again, but Harrington doesn’t say anything at all.

Eventually, Billy shoves Harrington through the door and into bed. He watches Harrington wriggle out of his jeans and curl up, looking small and miserable, on the sheets. Billy throws the blanket over him. “Go to sleep, asshole,” Billy says.

Again, Harrington listens.

When the rain stops, Billy goes to school.

~

At the end of the day, Tommy and Carol are waiting for him. Neither is stupid enough to actually lean against his car, so they’re propped up against each other, kind of in front of it. Billy takes his time walking up, cigarette hanging from his lips when he finally gets there. “What the fuck do you want?” he asks.

Tommy’s eyes narrow. “Where the fuck is Steve?”

And Billy’s got to admit, he’s a little impressed by the way he doesn’t take a half step back when Billy grins, sharp and mean and says, “I don’t think that’s any of your business,” and drops the useless end of his cigarette to the ground, grinds it under his heel. That Tommy’s here doesn’t surprise him, what does surprise him is what happens next.

Because what happens next is Carol, her hair a little frizzy from the storm, stomps up to Billy and grabs him by his jacket collar, gets close enough Billy can see where her lip is chapping under her gloss and says, her gum popping, “I know you don’t fuck any of the girls you take out,” real low and dangerous, and if Billy’s honest, it’s a

better threat than anything Tommy could do with his fists.

Billy takes a half step back. Carol drops her hands and smooths her skirt, watching him. "So just answer Tommy's question," she says, smacking her gum like a fucking cow, and Billy wishes she'd just slapped him like he'd thought she would.

"He's safe at home," Billy finally answers through grit teeth.

"Well he's not answering the phone," Tommy answers, fists clenched, and Billy can see something that looks a little bit like actual worry on his face.

"We'll go to his house," Carol announces, stepping away from Billy to plaster herself up back against Tommy. She's got a hand on his chest, which she pats there. "You better not be lying to me, Billy Hargrove," Carol says, and she says it like she's flirting, like she's funny, but it's sharp as a fucking knife.

"I'm not," Billy answers. "Get the fuck away from my car."

And maybe he was going to go back to Harrington's, maybe, but he's not going to *now*, not with the two of them fucking heading over that way.

So he goes home, instead, and his dad is still at work, and Billy offers to help Susan with dinner. She's surprised, or whatever, but says yes, and his dad can't fucking say *anything*, can he, when he walks into the kitchen to find Billy chopping onions because Susan's explaining she doesn't like the way they make her eyes water.

His dad doesn't like, acknowledge him, or anything, but he also doesn't haul Billy off by the hair or make Billy stand there, tears on his fucking cheeks, while he burns holes in his chest, so Billy's gonna call the whole fucking thing a win.

What he'd like to do, kind of, is call Harrington, but that's not going to happen, so he earns some more brownie points by helping Max with her math homework and turning his music off right when he hears Susan going to bed, and then he lies down and stares at the ceiling and wonders how long he can pull this off before his dad

actually does ask him if he's still on the straight and fucking narrow.

Billy hates liars, but he's been one his whole goddamn life, so.

He rolls onto his side and finally turns off the fucking light.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

I know this has been a VERY LONG WAIT and thanks for your patience <3 as ever I am also @lymricks on tumblr and I am v v v ready for it to stop being hot

## 7. VII

Steve had been born in a cicada summer, his mom always says. They've come again, and it feels like they're *his* cicadas. They scream and wander and scream and wander. It's nearly loud enough to drown out the thoughts swirling around in his head. He wonders if they'll walk over him. He wonders if it could possibly be that easy, to be swallowed up, to disappear. His own screams lost in theirs.

Above him, the stars are Indiana bright, perfect pinprick holes in the deep black blanket of sky. There are no clouds. He'd been expecting rain, but it had cleared - an unexpected wind had knocked the clouds off course. Steve knows exactly how they feel.

His walkie crackles somewhere to his left, a voice that sounds like Dustin's going, "Steve, c'mon, man."

Steve hasn't seen anyone in a week. Not since Tommy and Carol left after he'd skipped school. Tommy had been fond, had been worried, even. For Steve, raw and wrung out for no good fucking reason in his bed, all of that had been too much.

Tommy had sat on the end of Steve's bed while Steve had lied on his stomach and stared at the wall, and Tommy had said, *just talk to me man* and it had been like fucking sandpaper against the inside of Steve's skull every single time he'd repeated it.

But his parents are out of town, so as long as Steve times it right, is careful about when people might drop by his house to check on him, he doesn't have to see anyone. He can wallow all he fucking wants and not understand why he's wallowing.

He can just. Do that.

Be alone.

He likes it this way: cicadas screaming, pinprick stars in the blackness of the Indiana sky.

Steve closes his eyes and tries to melt into the ground. It's not

impossible, he thinks. He knows the ground can swallow someone whole. He hadn't known it before the fall, but he knows it now. It's that kind of knowledge that keeps him up at night, on nights like this, maybe. That kind of knowing that bounces against the walls of his understanding and makes him feel like he's coming apart. He remembers the tunnels, is the problem. He can't fucking forget them.

He hadn't wanted to die that night and he doesn't, he thinks, wants to die now. He just feels *weird*.

Maybe if he were underground his skin would feel less itchy.

Nighttime is when it's most likely someone might come to check on him, which is why he'd driven the BMW out here, to this fucking field that someone mows, or whatever, where cicadas scream and there are probably spiders and ants and shit. None of those could eat him, but that's not nearly as relieving as it should be. The problem is that he doesn't think he'd like, mind, if something *did* eat him right now, in this moment.

Maybe a hole to another dimension will open in the sky above him and then he won't have to worry about the fact that there's something in him so restless that he spends most days, lately, feeling like he's crawling out of his own skin.

Would it be different if his parents were home more? He can't be sure, and anyway that's a dull, old anger. He's picked that scab enough times that it's scarred. It doesn't have the bite it used to.

There's the roar of an engine slicing through his wondering, then. Steve can hear tires shredding grass. Whoever mows this farm is going to be *pissed*.

There's the silence of a car that's been turned off.

There's footsteps on the grass, and the cicadas around him go silent. They're used to Steve's stillness, and this is an intruder.

"Harrington, what the actual *shit*? Where the fuck have you been? Have you been in this field the entire goddamn *time*?"

It's so Billy, Steve thinks, to sound like that, to carry that anger in his

voice. Billy's been worried, but he just sounds angry. Steve wonders if all that Billy knows how to be is angry. If it's a little like all that Steve knows how to feel, lately, is vacant, a house on the corner with all the lights turned off all at once, a car left running in the driveway, no driver in sight.

"No. I *shower*," Steve says. "I can't do that in a fucking field."

"You've got to be fucking *kidding me*," Billy snarls, but then he stops being a disembodied voice and starts being a face attached to a body that's crouching down next to where Steve's sprawled out on his back. If he wanted to, Steve thinks, Billy Hargrove could kill him right now, but he also thinks that maybe they're past the point where Billy Hargrove wants to kill him.

"Your face looks like shit," Steve informs him, because it does. It's a patchwork of bruises, yellowing and old and deeper, more menacing colors. Those are new. Billy's eyebrow is split open in a way that Steve's sure is going to scar. It looks painful. Even in the pale light of the moon, Steve can see that it's swollen and angry. It's probably hot to the touch.

"Yeah, well my dad doesn't fucking like liars, Harrington. I think he could smell you on me, or some shit. I lied."

Steve tips his head to the side, so that Billy's face goes crooked and so that Steve's temple is almost under his knees. Billy's going to hurt himself if he keeps crouching like that, but Steve's not his fucking babysitter, so he doesn't warn him about it.

He just says, "Oh," like he's really pondering what Billy's dad did to his face at some point in the last seven days.

"I really appreciate the fucking concern," Billy snaps at him, but then he's sitting back on his ass, and Steve rolls and flops and shifts until his head is in Billy's lap. "You gonna blow me?" Billy asks, but he's stroking his fingers through Steve's hair in a way that Steve thinks doesn't feel like he wants Steve to suck his dick. That's probably good. Making out had been one thing, but that feels like a *lot*.

"I didn't think you'd tell him?" Steve says.



"Well that's the thing about assholes like my dad. He just fucking asks, Harrington. I didn't need to tell him shit."

"Oh," Steve says, "Sorry."

"What are you sorry for? Shut up. Jesus *Christ*," Billy says, and Steve blinks up at him and thinks about how his hair looks nearly white in this moonlight. Steve feels like maybe something in him shattered this week. He doesn't know what he's supposed to do now.

"It wasn't supposed to go like this," Steve says, his voice an empty house. "It wasn't--I was going to graduate, you know? Marry Nancy. Get a job working for my dad and hate it a normal amount, but now--" he trails off and shrugs, shoulder bumping Billy, and Billy hisses, and that's how Steve learns there's more bruises under his clothes.

"Yeah, well I was supposed to go to a California school," Billy says, "Get to be gay in a place that doesn't want to kill me. I was supposed to have a mom until I didn't need one anymore. I was supposed to stay *tan*, but I'm here in Indi-fucking-ana and I'm pale as *shit*, so."

Steve closes his eyes. "What are we supposed to do now?" he asks. His voice sounds small in the big fucking field, with its fresh mowed grass torn up by Billy's tires, with all its spiders and its ants.

"We get out of this field," Billy tells him. "What the fuck is that *screeching*?"

"I was thinking more in the long term," Steve says. "And it's the cicadas. I was born in a cicada summer, you know. They go underground for like, seventeen years, and then they come out and they just scream."

"We're all fucking disappointed by the world," Billy says. He's tugging on a piece of Steve's hair, but it doesn't sting. It feels kind of nice. "They don't gotta sound like *that* about it."

Steve makes a soft, humming noise. "Y'know, I think that's exactly what Mrs. Herbsfield is thinking when she tells you to turn your music down when you drive past her house," he muses.

He's expecting the hand in his hair to pull, to hurt, but Billy just laughs. It slices through the air and burrows deep in Steve's bones. For the first time in seven days, he huffs out a laugh of his own. "Harrington," Billy says, and he sounds fond, "You are so fucked up."

That seems like as good a time as any to stand up. Steve stretches his arms over his head, his spine popping. He's covered in twigs and leaves and--he hopes--exactly zero spiders. Billy's hands are certain and strong when they brush away all the nature clinging to Steve's shirt. "Let's go," Billy says, "You good to drive?"

He's asking if Steve's drunk. It's a fair question, Steve thinks. He's been drunk a lot, lately. Also, he was just lying down in a field for a few hours.

"I'm good," Steve answers. He grabs Billy's hand, laces their fingers together and squeezes. He doesn't feel *good*, he thinks, but maybe he does feel a little better.

They've only taken about three steps when Billy says. "What the *fuck* was that?" and the hair on the back of Steve's neck stands up. He'd been thinking that *he* wouldn't mind getting eaten. He doesn't want to drag Billy into that bullshit.

"What?" he asks. Steve's grip in Billy's hand goes tight, and he looks around, listens for a different kind of scream, for a different kind of twig snapping in the field, but he sees nothing.

Billy yanks him to the side, "That!" he says, pointing, but again, Steve doesn't see anything at all.

"Are *you* good to drive?" Steve asks, blinking at Billy.

"It's right fucking *there*, Christ Harrington, I know you can't focus on one thing for longer than like, twelve seconds, but *look*."

Billy drops his hand to grip his jaw, to turn Steve's head to a patch of nothing but empty air and moonlight. Steve stares at it. "Billy--" he says, "I really don't--"

And then there's a pinprick flash of yellow, a spot of brightness in the middle of the air, and then it's gone.

“That!” Billy crows, triumphant. “Did you see *that*?”

Steve pulls his face out of Billy’s jaw and stares at him. “It’s just a lightning bug?” he says.

“That’s a *bug*?”

“Or like, some people call them fireflies?” Steve says, and then Billy’s walking toward another, and then another. It seems to happen all at once. One second it had been Steve and the stars and the screaming cicadas, and now the field is all lightning bugs, blinking in and out of existence. It’s a different kind of screaming, Steve thinks. In all that blackness, they’re right there, still bright.

“I’ve never seen them,” Billy says. “We don’t have this shit in California.”

The expression on Billy’s face is startling in its softness, its awe. Steve doesn’t think he’s ever seen something surprise Billy before. At least, not in a good way.

They watch the lightning bugs for a while. “I could catch them,” Steve offers eventually. “I think I have a jar in my trunk.”

“Why would you do that?” Billy asks. “Why would you ever fucking do that? Look at them. Someone should tell those cicadas or whatever that *this* is how it’s done.”

Billy pulls out a cigarette, then, and lights it. The embers at the end of it almost look like a little lightning bug, hovering in front of Billy’s mouth. It makes Steve smile.

Billy’s voice is quieter than Steve’s ever heard it when he finally holds his hand back out. “C’mon,” Billy says. “Let’s go home and figure out what we should do next.”

“All right,” Steve says. Billy’s hand is warm in his, and the summer stretches out in front of them, and everything is screaming, and nothing is *good*, Steve thinks, but when he slides into the passenger’s seat of the Camaro, leaves his BMW to be tomorrow morning’s problem, he thinks that maybe it isn’t *bad* either.

Steve leans his temple against Billy's shoulder as they roar through the streets of Hawkins, and Mrs. Herbsfield is *definitely* calling the cops, but.

A work in progress. He can deal with that.

I want the cottage. I want the  
green grass and the tomato plants.  
I want the peace in you;  
the front porch rocking chair lullaby;  
our cricket legs rubbing  
together under the covers.

We can't have it all. I know  
that, but humor me. We can't  
have it all, but we can have most of it.  
— Caitlyn Siehl, from "Apple Pie Life"

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Thanks for your patience with how long and meandering this story ended up being. I'm @lymricks on tumblr, too, and I'm fresh outta ideas, but excited about the fall, so.

Come send me poems and prompts or scream with me about these two or anything else.

<3